

Hentze-Dor Real Estate, Inc.

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City Steamrollers Willets Pt. Firms

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Back in May, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the city's bold new vision for an 8.9 million-square-foot convention center, 5.5 million square feet of housing, and a retail and hotel complex in a gritty industrial area of Willets Point, Queens.

The project hinges on a plan for the city to take ownership of 61 acres now occupied by 250 businesses and Mayor Bloomberg said that the city was "working with local business leaders" on the details.

During the first official "scoping session" in early May, officials of the city's Economic Development Corp. said they had been "engaging" business executives and responding to their concerns about the project.

The only problem is that local businesspeople all of whom face the threat of having the land beneath them seized under eminent domain don't recall having been "engaged."

"I have never received one letter from the city," says G.L. Soni, chief executive of House of Spices. The food and spice maker ranks as one of the largest employers in Willets Point, with 175 workers there. "I think I would remember if I had a conversation, and I can tell you that nobody has called me or sat down with me since this whole thing started."

He's not alone. Many other business and property owners in the area just north of Shea Stadium echo his story.

"Nobody from the city has ever contacted me," says Thomas Mina, president and owner of T Mina Supply, a piping supplier.

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Business owners claim that their first contact with anyone official was at the environmental scoping meeting in May.

"It's just BS," says Dave Antonacci, co-owner of Crown Container Co., a trash-hauling and waste-transfer company in Willets Point. "The mayor says he's speaking to us? He's not speaking to us. Nobody is."

The EDC insists that it has made several broad overtures to the Willets Point business community over the past few years, and that it has contacted many owners individually in recent months.

"It just wasn't appropriate to talk with them before we knew we had a plan that we could physically do before we knew we had a developer that would build it and a bank that would finance it," says Bill Walsh, vice president of real estate development at the EDC, which in February asked eight real estate developers to submit proposals. "We do now."

Mr. Walsh adds that the EDC is "very much looking forward" to talking with Willets Point businesspeople.

But for property and business owners like Mr. Mina, those promises ring hollow.

"They're going through this process like Gen. Grant taking Richmond," he says. "They're forging ahead and ignoring the legalities of what they must do."

Hilary Potkewitz